International Journal of Communication 8 (2014), Forum 1089–1106 1932–8036/2014FRM0002

Participations: Dialogues on the Participatory Promise of Contemporary Culture and Politics

PART 2: LABOR

MARK ANDREJEVIC
University of Queensland, Australia

JOHN BANKS
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

JOHN EDWARD CAMPBELL
Temple University, USA

NICK COULDRY
London School of Economics, UK

ADAM FISH
Lancaster University, UK

ALISON HEARN
University of Western Ontario, Canada

LAURIE OUELLETTE
University of Minnesota, USA

Nick Couldry (Introduction):

Changing forms of information production and circulation must have some implications for the division of labor. Some see new spaces of positive social and political potential, whereas others see new forms of labor exploitation. Can we formulate any common ground that would advance the debate?

Is unrewarded labor ever good? Are we in the middle of a genuine rethinking of what constitutes labor (as opposed to free creative activity)? How do questions of labor connect with changing regimes of temporality? Do we have a basic need for free time and unconstrained activity, and, if we do, how is this consistent with digital developments? Should we care if our activities generate profitable data for others, and, if so, why?

Mark Andrejevic:

I imagine that there is a fair amount of overlap between those who see new spaces of creative production with positive social and political potential and those who also see new forms of labor exploitation in the changing forms of information production and circulation Nick references. Theorists of these changes may frame the relationship between the up- and downsides differently, and they may choose to focus more pointedly on one or the other aspect, but I imagine each would concede that both aspects potentially exist simultaneously. I wouldn't want to make this into a two-sides-to-every-story ledger-balancing exercise, but I do want to point out that the critical position conserves the possibility of imagining how things might be otherwise—and this "otherwise" tends to gesture in the direction of the potential benefits of the technologies, perhaps even conceding some actual ones. By the same token, the celebration of the positive social and political potential concedes the need for change in a progressive direction.

Having said that, however, I suspect it might be harder to arrive at a clear, common ground sense of what exactly some of the core issues are. I've been following discussions around the notion of exploitation in the digital era for a while now and would be fascinated to see whether it's possible to arrive at a shared understanding of what we might mean by that term—or, failing that, to at least arrive at a shared sense of what the key questions are that would need to be answered to determine whether exploitation is taking place. We could probably relatively easily agree on the fact that exploitation is taking place in the clothing sweatshops of Bangladesh or in Foxconn's factories or in the orange groves of Florida—these are examples that fit with the forms of labor in response to which the prevalent, Marxist-inflected version of exploitation took shape. Addressing the depredations of human immiseration would certainly entail prioritizing a focus on these and related forms of brutal and dehumanizing exploitation. Such forms of exploitation give rise to familiar definitions of exploitation such as those outlined by Nancy Holmstrom (1997) ("surplus, unpaid and forced labor, the product of which the producers do not control") or Erik Olin Wright: (as paraphrased by David Hesmondhalgh (2010, p. 274):

> Exploitation occurs when the material welfare of one class is causally dependent upon the material deprivation of another. . . . Second, that causal dependence depends in turn on the exclusion of workers from key productive resources, especially property. Third, the mechanism through which both these features (causal dependence and exclusion) operate is appropriation of the labour of the exploited.

But what about the forms of value-generating activity that, in the online economy, have been described as exploitative (by, for example, Tiziana Terranova, 2000), but don't exactly fit the industrial-era model? There is a sense of concern about the terms of ownership and control that allow Facebook, for example, to harness the power of what one industry executive described in *The Wall Street Journal* as "the largest unpaid workforce in history" (Laney, 2012, para. 2).

In a not unrelated formulation, tech guru Jaron Lanier (2013) has described the online data economy in terms of the emergence of "a new tiny class of people who always benefit. Those who keep the new ledgers, the giant computing services that model you, spy on you, and predict your actions, turn your life activities into the greatest fortunes in history" (p. 1). The terms mobilized here reek of exploitation: a

small owner class benefits from the unpaid labor of the masses. But what about the coercion and the immiseration? Just how concerned might we be about exploitation (of users) that doesn't seem to result directly in the aggravation of human misery? Christian Fuchs (2010), among others, has pushed in the direction of considering the ways in which coercion is embedded in the social relations and processes that make social networking and other networked tools of information access and information sharing crucial to a certain type of (increasingly precarious) worker, and we might have to expand our notion of immiseration to include the ways in which our own data are being turned back upon us for purposes ranging from law enforcement to health care. But do we then run the danger of trivializing more brutal and widely recognized forms of exploitation? This needn't be the case, I think—indeed, in tracing a common thread between very different forms of exploitation, perhaps we are also unearthing the potential basis for a recognition of solidarity. Holmstrom emphasizes the central role played by "alienation" in Marx's account of exploitation, and this remains, for me, a crucial insight into the insidious character of all kinds of exploitation: They transform our own activity (or at least an important part of it) back upon ourselves in unrecognizable form, serving interests and imperatives that are not our own.

Nick Couldry:

I am glad that Mark raised the question: What actually is our definition of exploitation? So how might we move toward defining that crucial term in a way that recognizes the specificities, and also limits, of digital contexts?

There clearly are cases—indeed, widespread cases—of immiseration within forms of digital labor. And Virginia Eubanks, in her book *Digital Dead End* (2011), points out that many poor digital workers have gone unrecognized in some high-profile debates, being more likely to be at the receiving end of well-meaning but mistargeted digital divide initiatives that are aimed at poverty but forget that many poor workers use ICT intensively in their poorly paid work.

But forms of inequality linked to the distribution of digital resources are not *felt* as exploitative, though they create asymmetries that are preconditions for future exploitation or abuse. My starting point here is to return to the concept of symbolic power and foreground the extreme asymmetries of symbolic power that characterize (in some respects, inevitably) the installation and operation of our everyday digital platforms. Legal scholar Julie Cohen (2012) puts it well when she writes about "a system of [digital] governance that is authoritarian in the generic sense: one that favors compliant submission to authority" (pp. 188–189). An authoritarian structure need not, per se, be exploitative, but it provides one starting point for specific forms of exploitation.

John Banks:

I think Mark has identified the issues here really well. What, indeed, is exploitation, and what practices might be characterized as exploitative in these digital contexts? As Mark notes, the clear cases of immiseration we can generally agree on. But what about the practices that aren't necessarily characterized by immiseration but are still shaped by asymmetric power relations in which value is captured by those with the power? Nick observes that in some of these cases the practices might not be

felt as exploitative. This is important. What are the conditions and contexts in which these practices (say, around the uses made of the data generated by participants) are felt to be exploitative or coercive by the participants? Are the same practices identified as exploitative by some participants but not by others? What are the differences at work here?

These are questions I've been very interested in with my video-games industry research. Through ethnographic research I've tried to identify when participants (both professional developers and gamers) start using the language of exploitation to characterize or to understand certain practices. It interests me that sometimes apparently the same practice, under certain conditions and at something of a threshold, can start to be viewed as unfair, unreasonable, and even exploitative and coercive. So the ethnographic approach here is to identify in what ways users and participants start identifying and characterizing various practices as exploitative and the various meanings that they attach to the practices.

In all this, the thorny problem of self-exploitation emerges. This is close to what Andrew Ross (2000) has described as "the mental labor problem." People might not view some practices initially as exploitative, but might they still be exploitative? What kinds of knowledge and awareness results in them shifting their perspective and starting to identify a practice as exploitative? I'm interested in controversies that emerge among participants (for example, between platform owners and users) in which terms around these practices, such as fairness, equity, and so on, start to be interrogated. However, my sense is to be somewhat careful and indeed reluctant to label practices as self-exploitation.

I'm interested in how shared senses or understandings of exploitation are emerging among the participants themselves around digital-era changes in conditions of cultural production and consumption. Mark's point that alienation may be especially significant is important—but what are these experiences of alienation, and how are they perhaps changing? What are, borrowing from Nick, the specificities of that alienation in digital contexts? Here, I'm drawing from recent research with games developers on how big data and associated data analytics impact on their craft of designing games. Some of the comments they've made to me in interviews might be characterized as expressions of alienation. But would they then also view this as a form of exploitation?

When do participants (following from Mark's formulation) identify their own activities as serving interests and imperatives that are not their own? Indeed, even when they are aware of this, are participants also at times comfortable with this? How are they assessing the balance of interests and imperatives at work here, including their own? The various ways in which many of these practices are framed and constituted (in their very materiality—here I'm thinking of work by Tarleton Gillespie, 2010, and others on politics of platforms and algorithmic culture) may make it difficult for participants to assess the various interests and imperatives in play.

So, in all this, our definition(s) of exploitation are important. But I'm also interested to ask what meanings and values are emerging among the participants themselves.

Adam Fish:

In my opinion, it has been historical amnesia, a rigid theoretical fidelity, and methodological limitations that prohibit political economists and cultural studies scholars from finding a common language for the description of production practices in information economies. With a historically situated and ethnographically grounded approach complete with a degree of theoretical infidelity capable of appropriating both political economic and cultural studies approaches, the "exploitation" versus "virtuous" sharing approach to Internet-enabled productivity can be transcended. I think John Banks' work (2013), which highlights the emic voices of those working in the video-game industry, shows that such polemics mean more to theorists than to working people. How to take our subjects seriously while building critical theory from their responses is our challenge.

Part of the problem is the temporality of research scale. Markets and commons are in a historically co-constituting relationship. Tim Wu (2011) calls this market/commons oscillating co-constitution the historical cycle from amateur-driven openness to professional closure that characterizes the trajectory of information infrastructures. Strangely, in my research with Internet and television producers, I've seen this historical cycle exist in their subjective labor histories. This meso-level historical approach recognizes how both creative and commoditizing agencies exist throughout a subject's life course. I am not sure what to call this research emphasis on temporality and experience, but it articulates with the possibility of social mobility, and it can't simply be categorized as either exploitation or virtuous work.

How to define time-based change, cultural processes, and subjective experience in a word? Semifictional anecdotes must do: the bug-exploiting hacker who turns into a cybersecurity expert, the open source geek who becomes a proprietary software maven, the World of Warcraft server owner who becomes a cloud service provider. For every instance of this social mobility there are countless individual and system-based failures. This boom-and-bust cycle is inherent to capitalist expansion and, with it, what Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) call the possibility and sadness of "hope labor." The eventual result of this selective social mobility might result in unsavory types of employment, and the political economist might say that these subjects are interpellated, their community discourse merely ideological, that they have false consciousness, and are hailed by the capitalism world system. Perhaps. My point is that moments of exploitation and virtuous community formation are in a co-constituting dialectical tension throughout a meso-phase of labor time and throughout the digital worker's life. We need a type of theoretical infidelity, appropriating theories from both political economy and cultural studies to make sense of this.

I agree with Mark that political economists think the world can be better. So the question remains of how to create ruptures that aren't just short-term entrepreneurial disruptions for the few but long-term political upheavals capable of making just and equitable labor possible for the many. How much improvement in terms of labor can the present information infrastructure actually bear? Is it possible to have information infrastructures, requiring billions of dollars in investment and running on advertising, and also have them democratize equal access to humane labor? Our colleagues researching free and open-source software often think these systems are truly antihegemonic; they are, as Schoonmaker (2012) calls them, a "virus" capable of "infecting capitalism." Following Streeter (2013) and also Morozov (2013),

I am not so sure there is a technological solution to the social problem of inequality. Can we support a system (capitalism) and its information infrastructures that result in inequality with a system that attempts to achieve equality (democracy)? How can we describe this system in such a way that is both true to the historical experiences of our research subjects and that can come to constitute theory? How we spend our labor and leisure, online and off-, is implicated in the answer.

Alison Hearn:

Of course, it goes without saying that I feel completely aligned with Mark's plea to maintain a commitment to critique, to imagining the world otherwise, even when that places difficult demands on us as researchers. As Adam notes, current conditions require us to engage in a kind of theoretical (and methodological) infidelity and an ongoing kind of situational reflexivity about the possible limits of our own fields, training, and, indeed, allegiance to our positions as independent thinkers and researchers.

Given the discussion so far, and inspired by a recent edition of *ephemera: theory and politics in organization* on the topic, it seems appropriate to revisit Paolo Virno's notion of the "communism of capitalism" (in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 2004). His claim is that post-Fordist capitalism appropriates communist ideas and practices and makes them the very ground for value production. Communist goals, such as the abolition of wage labor, the end of the centrality of the state as political decision maker, and the proliferation of different forms of individual self-valorization, undergo "an insidious and terrible interpretation" (Virno, 2004, p. 110) under contemporary capitalism, morphing into something thoroughly recognizable, and yet also deeply "uncanny" (Beverungen, Murtola, & Schwartz, 2013). Boltanski and Chiapello, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), have also addressed these broad developments, as have many others who have embraced the rise of this kind of "virtual communism" (Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2004). But, to my mind, Virno pithily highlights a central and crucial contradiction; under these conditions we see "a communality of generalized intellect without material equality" (2004, p. 14).

Of course, one obvious and foundational set of material inequities involves the privately owned and unaccountable infrastructures and baseline architectures that condition and orient our online expressions, participation, and sociality (i.e., our communications and our "commons"). Under these structuring conditions, the commons is reduced to a mere resource, and the task of political economy must involve tracing how this resource is conditioned, legally constrained or enabled, mined, packaged, and exchanged for value by the barons of the social media gold rush; in other words, we must try to access the new "hidden abode" of online value production, tracking its means and relations of production. It also requires mapping out emergent forms of worker subjectivity. Some of these include the social media influencer; the perpetually monitored, always-on, mobile worker; and the microworker or Mechanical Turker. As Adam suggests, we must be attentive to the ways these new forms of worker subjectivity are caught in a temporally based boom-and-bust cycle. As we witness the perpetual disaggregation and reaggregation of worker subjectivity, we see intensified contradictions; on the one hand, worker uniqueness and distinctiveness (i.e., self-branding) is summoned as necessary value added by potential employers, and, on the other, we are told that our singularity and specificity, as individuals and workers, matters little to data miners and analyzers, who are only looking for broad patterns of behavior. And so individuals are inserted into the global flows of capital in all their specificity and yet are simultaneously stripped of their

meaningful identities; they become resource, worker, and product but do not control the means of their representation, their circulation, or the profits that are derived. To borrow a term introduced by Nick Dyer-Witheford (2001), we become indebted global value subjects.

Actually pursuing the kind of institutional analysis and production study outlined above is very difficult, because, as John points out, so many of the processes involved (data-mining procedures, algorithms, etc.) are black-boxed, and, even when researchers do gain access, they are often required to sign nondisclosure agreements. As a result, the quality and communication of findings can be severely limited. Those of us in the academy who want to conduct research into the property regimes underpinning so much of our communication find ourselves confronting the issue of access to these logics at every turn. These limits are not simply a question of methodological hurdles to be overcome by better, or better connected, scholarship; as they raise larger political issues about access and control, they illuminate the limits of our own material conditions of production as independent scholars and force us to confront how, or where, we figure ourselves on the spectrum between activist scholarship and accommodationist capitulation. If we cannot access the terms of measurement and valorization that constitute the grounds and parameters of new forms of work, how are we meant to understand, contest, or think beyond them? Must we join the private research departments of Intel or Microsoft to procure the information necessary to form an empirically based critique? How, and on what terms, can we constitute independent criticism on the conflicted terrain of the communism of capitalism?

Laurie Ouellette:

Many important issues have been raised, but there is an absence in the conversation thus far. That absence is gender.

The subject implied by much scholarship on digital labor is male. What happens when we acknowledge and foreground gender difference? This shift of emphasis could lead to a consideration of the mostly impoverished women sweatshop workers who manufacture our digital devices, as Vicki Mayer (2011) has done.

Taking gender into account also complicates the agency/creativity versus free labor debate. On the one hand, the persistent sexual division of labor must be acknowledged by celebratory accounts of the digital environment. Who has the leisure time to co-create? Whose interactivity is configured around the gendered practices of self-improvement and family regulation? Is something lost when we value the political possibilities of intense engagement via new technologies over the pleasurable distractions (what Janice Radway, 1991, called "temporary escapes") historically offered by women's mass media?

On the other hand, powerful critiques that rely mainly on a male subject must also be rethought. Current understandings of exploitation often overlook the role of unwaged women's domestic and familial work in the production of surplus value. How might we address the rising imperative to create, interact, and coproduce digital content in light of the persistent sexual division of labor? To what extent is women's digital production and interactivity configured around practices of self-improvement and family regulation?

How does this unwaged activity contribute to the production of brand value, and how is it harnessed to produce neoliberal socioeconomic arrangements?

Nick Couldry:

We have an interesting tension emerging here between the need to respect the emic aspects of what might be exploitation in the realm of digital labor and the fact that large-scale exploitation doesn't tend to come with a "how to deconstruct me" pack attached. A lot of work needs to be done to develop a metalanguage that includes terms through which complex practices might be validly seen as exploitation. This is particularly so where the site of power in question involves the concentration of symbolic resources, since such power holders will certainly have developed their own positive and influential narrative about what is going on that does not use the word *exploitation*.

If this last point is agreed, then maybe we should see if we can try to develop such a metalanguage in this conversation. My first stab along these lines, inspired by Alison's comments in particular, is that digital conditions of labor, whatever their other positive aspects, facilitate strategies that pass onto laborers the possibility/obligation to produce not only the human preconditions (as Marx expected) but also the direct means of their labor: the website, the platform, the network, the blog, the constant acts of digital monitoring, reskilling, and so on. A frequent spin on this from power holders is that this amounts to a condition of freedom, and it may often be felt this way, too; but, as many of you make clear in your work, this is far from simply being the case. We're back again to Beck's (1992) phrase about individuals being forced to "find biographical solutions to systemic contradictions."

The push toward big data harvesting, however, generalizes this tension to all who, through their interactions online, generate data of value to large-scale capital. They/we generate abstract data value through the interactions we perform, but, in the process of doing so, we use (exploit?) ourselves/our partners in all our/their bodily specificity.

John Edward Campbell:

I would like to return to Nick's original provocation. Nick asked if we are in the midst of rethinking what constitutes labor as opposed to free creative activity. For me, the distinction between labor and such creative activities is artificial and unproductive. I suspect the impetus to see various online creative activities as something other than labor stems from the conflation of labor and exploitation. However, if we return to a fundamental Marxist understanding, labor in and of itself need not be exploitative. Rather, labor is simply the process by which humans transform the world around them. In the process of transformation, something meaningful—something of value—to humans is created. This value need not be economic, but rather could be purely aesthetic, functional, or pleasurable. Thus, when Henry David Thoreau ventured into the woods near Walden Pond and constructed for himself a cabin in which to live, he was performing labor in the strict Marxist sense. Importantly, Marx points out that in this process, the person performing the labor is also transformed. As Marx articulates in *Capital* (1976), it is through the performance of labor that we come to realize our own potential.

Furthermore, in *Grundrisse* (1973), Marx sees labor as a process of discovery; through labor individuals discover aspects of themselves (talents, ambitions, needs, desires) of which they were previously unaware. They grow not only in regard to their skills and abilities, but also in terms of their self-conceptions. In my recent work with Disney fans who produced unofficial Disney content on various social media platforms, it is through the time and effort they invest in their creations that they discover new talents and passions. To fail to see these activities as a form of labor is to downplay the considerable effort that goes into producing these creative products.

So how, then, does exploitation enter into the equation? Mark already alluded to Erin Olin Wright and the notion that exploitation occurs when there is coercion to perform various forms of labor that benefit other classes at the expense of the laborer. The problem Mark rightly identifies is that such exploitation is easily recognized under traditional industrial relations but is far less clear under the conditions of information capitalism, where so many forms of labor appear voluntary. This is complicated by the fact that some online activities carry with them their own intrinsic rewards, such as a sense of community or creative expression. Tiziana Terranova (2000) has noted how some of these forms of free labor can be both pleasurable and exploitative, and Hector Postigo (2009) uses the term "passionate labor" to identify certain online practices that provide sufficient emotional returns that they aren't even recognized as work by those performing them.

For these reasons, I find it useful to distinguish between oppressive forms of exploitation and more abstract forms of exploitation made possible by information technologies. As David Hesmondhalgh (2010) has argued, it's problematic to suggest the person sitting at a computer making posts on Facebook or uploading videos to YouTube is exploited in the same sense as those working in Indonesian sweatshops. Oppressive forms of exploitation are readily apparent to the worker and have a direct and obvious impact on the material existence of the laborer, whether in the sweatshops in Bangladesh, the Foxconn plants in China, or among workers at Walmart in the United States who are not paid a livable wage.

However, in abstract modes of exploitation, the worker may remain unaware of the wealth his or her activities generate for a small class of people. This would be the case with what I identify as the "labor of devotion"—a form of work found in brand communities (Campbell, 2011). Furthermore, the worker does not necessarily see any material impact on his or her existence as a result of the labor. Certainly with Kuehn and Corrigan's notion of "hope labor" (as mentioned by Adam) or Brooke Duffy's concept of "aspirational labor" (Marwick & Duffy, 2013), the worker may see such free labor as potentially improving the material conditions under which he or she lives. All this requires a rethinking of what exploitation means under the conditions of information capitalism.

Finally, in opening this discussion, Nick asked whether unrewarded labor is ever a good thing. If by *unrewarded* we mean not financially compensated, then the answer is most assuredly yes. Many forms of volunteer and activist work receive no financial compensation, yet the rewards of such labor are found in the very efforts to improve the material conditions of humanity. The distinction between volunteer and activist work and what Terranova identifies as free labor is that volunteers and activists are aware of who (at least abstractly) benefits from their efforts. In contrast, the free laborer is not necessarily aware of who is profiting from his or her efforts and thus enters into the arrangement (potentially) uninformed.

Such asymmetries of knowledge are arguably a central feature of those abstract modes of exploitation found under the conditions of information capitalism.

Mark Andrejevic:

Rereading the posts so far, I'm struck by the general level of agreement and by the very useful qualifications, provocations, and formulations that have emerged around the theme of labor and the question of exploitation. This is, I realize, at least in part a function of the commitments shared by the group that Nick has assembled. The comments have also exhibited broad shifts in theoretical focal length: from close-ups of particular case studies to big-picture questions about ownership and control of the communicative infrastructure, the role of gender in the configuration of various forms of interactivity, and the compatibility of democratic values with capitalist imperatives. It seems important, and perhaps a defining challenge, to attempt to think those various levels together. Such an attempt would likely end up having to step back farther to consider the larger context in which digital labor, however one might construe the term, is embedded. In other words, we would find ourselves asking questions about how the various examples cited so far fit within broader logics of global capitalism. Answering questions about the digital surely entails avoiding the temptation of placing it at the center of the analysis in ways that eclipse the economic and social systems in which its deployment is embedded.

I was recently revisiting some of the debates around the provocations in Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2008) and was struck by a familiar pattern: the use of compelling anecdotes to counter overarching general claims (about the myth of media democratization). We are by now past the moment of as-yet-unfulfilled potential when the anecdotal might claim to hold sway. We can now ask some pointed empirical questions about how forms of systemic, structural inequality (economic, geographic, gender, and more) are faring in the wake of the deployment of digital communication technologies and strategies. We might give different answers in different political, social, and regional contexts, but we would be hard pressed, I think, to insulate the media from their societal contexts—to say, for example, that the forms of increasing economic inequality and centralized forms of political control in the United States are unrelated to digital transformations. Whatever benefits one attributes to these transformations—and I wouldn't want to discount these—they emerge against the background of a somewhat more ominous horizon and reflect its shadows.

To borrow John Campbell's terms, I think it's worth asking how and when what he calls "abstract exploitation" becomes concrete. I like the formulation not so much because I think that the forms of exploitation to which it refers can only be considered as such in nonconcrete terms, but because of the implication that work needs to be done to reattach them to the social relations and consequences from which they have been abstracted.

Adam Fish:

As John Campbell noted, we need to consider the political potential of transformational digital labor. Is the production of radical infrastructures possible, and, if so, what role can theory have in their production? Any digital democracy, as Mark notes, depends not upon anecdotes of empowered citizen-journalists but

on the development of critical media theory and autonomous global information infrastructures. Globally distributed and pan-nationally governed information infrastructures on which our social, political, and economic lives increasingly depend are prohibitively expensive to produce. But for a moment let's improbably ponder what role digital laborers and their competencies may have in producing antihegemonic information infrastructures. Alison reminds us that in its self-valorization, digital capitalism appropriates a mundane politics—the mitigation of alienation—and thereby distracts us from the revolutionary politics of social emancipation. Can we as scholars refocus from the banalities of free labor to the radical project of emancipatory labor?

On digital laborers with coding, hacking, cryptographic, and network administration skills, the hope for radical infrastructure resides. These "recursive publics" of computer geeks, as Chris Kelty (2008) calls them, with the agencies to transform their means of production—operating systems, open-source software, and network configurations—carry a political potential beyond their classical Western liberalism so accurately depicted by Gabriella Coleman (2012). Our research may facilitate the development of this political consciousness. Henry Jenkins (2014), for instance, uses corporate speaking invitations to lend "support to the more progressive voices within these organizations" (p. 279). How can our pedagogy and scholarship "nudge," to use Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's irritating term (2008), these geeks not toward the production of hegemonic, or even counterhegemonic systems that valorize a contradictory capitalist democracy but toward imagining revolutionary information infrastructures? This would entail a shift of focus from merely counterhegemonic information infrastructure (open-source software, 3-D printing, ICT4D, etc.) to something more in the tradition of WikiLeaks, the Silk Road, Tor, and the International Modern Media Institute. Complicities with hegemonic capitalist democracy and dependencies on the privatized global Internet exist in each of these examples, but they are employers of digital workers in more or less antihegemonic work. Like historical analyses of worker's lives, such hybrid spaces of media activism/labor complicate any theoretical fidelity to either cultural studies or political economy. Capitalist/democracy and labor/activism—these are the conflated contradictions at the crux of our problem that require robust field, historiographical, and critical discursive methodologies to explore. With these methodologies we may discover that antihegemonic information infrastructures—not unlike reified concepts such as digital democracy and free labor—exist in discursively vibrant but constructivist states of embodiment—good to think with but impossible to identify in indigenous practices.

I think Alison has an excellent idea that perhaps we should join Intel and Microsoft to perform a type of knowledge exchange with digital workers. They can provide us ethnographic encounters while we engage them in political reflection. Once access is given, can our theories be mobilized to politicize a generation of coders before they become digital workers? This is certainly the type of collaborative yet critical media studies I would like to see more of in the future.

Alison Hearn:

I wish that Intel and Microsoft would allow us to set up the kinds of research projects Adam describes! I was being sardonic when I made the suggestion about joining Microsoft and Intel. The reality is that these companies are already cherry-picking high-performing scholars and recruiting them to become engineers. (Melissa Gregg gave a really sensitive and illuminating talk about hacktivism and her recent move to Intel

at the Apps and Affect conference we held here in [the other] London in Canada this past fall. See http://appsandaffect.blogspot.ca.) These scholars have access to huge amounts of data and tech support, great resources, and lots of freedom to design their research. But there are only a few of them, and we cannot be sure how much reactivity there might be between having such a lucrative and well-resourced corporate research job and the kinds of research that gets produced. My limited experience as a university-based independent scholar is that places like Microsoft and Intel will not disclose much at all when approached for site visits or interviews, or else they make you sign a nondisclosure agreement. But this does not mean we shouldn't try what Adam suggests, and I would definitely be on board to do so.

I admit that I am dubious about Adam's other suggestion that we try nudging coders and hackers to a counterhegemonic sensibility before they become digital laborers. My sense is that many of these people, as we've already noted, occupy a liminal space between a vague political libertarianism (anonymous-esque) and a desire to hit it big as professional game or app designers, or well-paid coders—the new dream jobs du jour of the digital labor market. The creation of a counterhegemonic information infrastructure has been tried. Design per se is not the issue; it's the velocity of the flow, capture, and containment of these efforts by global virtual finance capital that should be our focus. In my old-fashioned Marxist opinion, it is only through a recognition of their alienation and exploitation as workers that we might come to see people push for shifts in the material conditions of work and then, potentially, in the products of that work (infrastructure design, for example) and its distribution. In the end, and at the risk of sounding clichéd and passé, although technologies and information infrastructures are important, they will not, on their own, make us freer or better. It is people, workers, who pay the price and people who will make change happen.

Having said that, Greig de Peuter, Enda Brophy, and Nicole Cohen have done great research on the ways in which new precarious workers, freelancers, interns, and free workers are making attempts to organize around the globe; see http://culturalworkersorganize.org. They are also involved in a project tracing the labors of mobility, from the coltan miners in the Congo (who include child workers and are often employed by militia groups and violent drug cartels) and the precarious, exploited mobile phone assembly workers at places like Foxconn, where surplus value is coextensive with other forms of mobility—specifically migration—to the feminized, affective labor of call center workers; the outsourced, immaterial, highly masculinized labor of the app developer; and the precarious, deeply underpaid microworker or MTurker, a form of work growing by leaps and bounds in the developing world, because it can be done on the mobile phone (Brophy & de Peuter, in press).

At the Apps and Affect conference, the term I heard deployed over and over again in almost every session I attended was *tether*. We are tethered to the network. We are tethered for work. We are tethered for play. We are tethered for social connection. We nurture and strengthen the tether to get rewards and the legitimation of high visibility. We are tethered to the networked general intellect, relying on immediate information without the validation of individual context or experience. In the face of the velocity of the "furies"—a metaphor Alex Galloway (2013) proposes for the contemporary distributed network, marked as it is by multiplicity, immanence, contagion, and an incontinence of form, with no space for interpretation, reflection or respite—we hold on very tight to our tether. To this, I say: Digital workers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your tethers!

John Edward Campbell:

Mark, while referencing Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, noted how the use of compelling anecdotes can sometimes function as distractions from broader patterns of oppression and inequality. I absolutely agree. That said, poignant anecdotes can expose the consequences for the individual of these overarching structures. For example, the story of Mary Margaret Vojtko, an adjunct teacher for Duquesne University for 25 years, who died homeless and without health care, can be used to bring attention to the growing inequalities and exploitation occurring within academic institutions that increasingly rely on precarious labor. The anecdote can remind us that structures and systems have very real material ramifications on the personal level. However, the question must always be: Is this the exception or the norm?

I also want to take a moment to clarify my thinking about abstract forms of exploitation. By abstract exploitation, I refer to how people may be contributing to a system of inequalities without themselves being directly materially impacted. Once the individual's life is in some way materially affected by the exploitation, it then becomes concrete or oppressive. Now, it's very important to keep in mind that the individual may not be fully aware of the ways his or her life is materially impacted by various online activities. For instance, individuals may not realize that information is being collected about them by the various online sites they use, and this information may be employed in determining what types of material opportunities will be made available to them. I have in mind here studies of online surveillance, such as Mark's work on YouTube and my work on PlanetOut (2005).

None of this precludes what Adam identifies as emancipatory labor, but we need to look critically at the ways the architecture of these commercial sites (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) facilitate or hinder such emancipatory impulses. Perhaps we should explore alternative models of online sites—such as noncommercial sites that will be viewed as public goods rather than private property—that more effectively promote emancipatory endeavors.

Laurie Ouellette:

Nick began our conversation by asking us to consider whether (and how) changing forms of information production and circulation integral to contemporary digital media culture have impacted the division of labor. Implicitly, he also challenges us to pave some new ground in the increasingly stale dichotomy between those who celebrate new spaces of creative social and political potential and those who see ever more nefarious forms of labor exploitation.

During our discussion, some concepts that structure this dichotomy (exploitation, value, even labor itself) have been opened and challenged in ways that I've found incredibly helpful. I'd like to push a bit further on the issue of subjectivity, and circle back to my earlier remarks on labor and gender.

The relationship between labor and subjectivity has already been suggested in a number of interesting ways: as the question of self-exploitation in the absence of coercion (John Banks), as the transformative possibilities of digital or hope labor (Adam Fish), and as the contradictions of online value production—the

provocative tension between the imperative to self-brand and the extent to which data mining ultimately cares little about individuality. However, subjects—including workers—are not born but made.

Likewise, as Kathi Weeks argues in *The Problem With Work* (2011), work is "not just an economic practice"; it is also fundamentally a process of subjectification to the norms of what she calls "The Work Society." From this perspective, it seems useful to sidestep concerns about the degree of exploitation associated with the production of the digital cultural economy and consider more fully the mediating function of digital activity as one component of the social constitution of laborers in the 21st century. How do populations "learn to labor" in a global economy that values creativity, flexibility, precarity, and immateriality? What role does our changing digital media culture play?

Here, scholarship on digital games as an informal training ground for immaterial labor in the West is especially helpful. Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter (2003) have connected skills acquired through game play to the requirements of the post-Fordist workforce. Feminist scholars such as Valerie Walkerdine (2009) and Aubrey Anable have highlighted the gendered nature of this training. For example, Anable suggests that "casual games" like Farmville mediate the skills and rhythms of time management associated with femininity and "stages the affective work of being a woman worker (what it feels like) . . . during a time when affective and immaterial labor has become the model for most work regardless of gender" (2013, para. 6). This, she suggests, is why casual (and much-derided) women's games are both useful to post-Fordist capitalism and deeply meaningful to the women subjects they help to create.

My own work with Julie Wilson (2011) on digital media platforms promising to help women manage families and domestic lives similarly calls for an expanded definition of labor that acknowledges unwaged women's work. Following political theorists such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Wendy Brown, we argue that unpaid affective and familial labor is generative of neoliberal sociality. A growing swath of digital media culture aimed at women literally extends the labor (and anxieties) associated with the care of families across changing configurations of mediated time and space. This second shift connects the pleasures and freedoms of interactive media to a dispersed mode of biopolitical production that isn't valorized as creative and doesn't count as exploitation in the traditional Marxist sense. Our research brings gender into Beck's formulation of finding autobiographical solutions to structural inequalities, noted by Nick. More to the point of this forum, it raises other questions we might ask about the sexual division of labor and the politics of gender and leisure in the digital media age.

■ ■ ■

Biographical Notes

Mark Andrejevic is deputy director and QEII Research Fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland. He is the director of the Personal Information Project at the University of Queensland, which researches public attitudes toward the collection and use of personal information in online and networked environments. His work explores the relationship between digital forms of interactivity and emerging forms of monitoring and surveillance.

John Banks is a senior lecturer and researcher in the Creative Industries faculty, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. He researches and publishes on co-creativity, innovation, and social media in the creative industries, especially video games and interactive entertainment. He has a special interest in organizational and workplace culture and has spent the past decade researching co-creativity in the video-games industry.

John Edward Campbell is an assistant professor in the School of Media and Communication at Temple University. He works at the intersection of critical media studies and political economy of communication. His research explores how diverse groups of people incorporate media technologies into their negotiation of everyday life, and his latest book explores the cultural practices of online gay communities.

Nick Couldry is a sociologist of media and culture. He is professor of media, communications, and social theory at the London School of Economics and was previously professor of media and communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author or editor of 11 books, including *Ethics of Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), *Media, Society, World* (Polity, 2012), and *Why Voice Matters* (Sage, 2010).

Adam Fish is a lecturer at the Lancaster University. He is a cultural anthropologist of activist and elite cultures of media and software production. His present research explores the discourses of digital democracy around Internet and television convergence in the United States, Internet freedom activists in the United Kingdom and Iceland, and peer-to-peer lending in the United Kingdom.

Alison Hearn is an associate professor in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, where she is also affiliated with the Center for American Studies and the Department of Visual Arts. Her research focuses on the intersections of promotional culture, self-production, labor, and economic value. She also writes on the university as a cultural and political site.

Laurie Ouellette is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, where she is also affiliated with the Departments of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies and American Studies, and with the graduate minor in moving image studies. She has published essays in a range of anthologies and journals and is currently completing a book on lifestyle television.

References

Anable, A. (2013). Casual games, time management, and the work of affect. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, 2*. doi:10.7264/N3ZW1HVD

Banks, J. (2013). *Co-creating videogames*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity* (Vol. 17). London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Beverungen, A., Murtola, A.-M., & Schwartz, G. (2013). The communism of capital? *ephemera: theory and politics in organization, 13*(3), 483–495.

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The new spirit of capitalism*: London, UK: Verso.

Brophy, E., & de Peuter, G. (In press). *Labours of mobility: Communicative capitalism and the smartphone cybertariat*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Campbell, J. E. (2005). Outing PlanetOut: Surveillance, gay marketing and Internet affinity portals. *New Media & Society, 7*(5), 663–683.

Campbell, J. E. (2011). It takes an ivillage: Gender, labor, and community in the age of television-Internet convergence. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 492–510.

Cohen, J. E. (2012). *Configuring the networked self: Law, code, and the play of everyday practice*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Coleman, G. (2012). *Coding freedom: The ethics and aesthetics of hacking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dyer-Witheford, N. (2001). The new combinations: Revolt of the global value-subjects. *CR: The New Centennial Review, 1*(3), 155–200.

Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games* (Vol. 29). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Eubanks, V. (2011). *Digital dead end: Fighting for social justice in the information age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fuchs, C. (2010). Web 2.0, Prosumption, and surveillance. *Surveillance & Society, 8*(3), 288–309.

Galloway, A. (2013). Love of the middle. In A. Galloway, E. Thacker, & M. Wark, *Excommunication: Three inquiries in media and mediation* (pp. 25–76). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of "platforms." *New Media & Society, 12*(3), 347–364.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2010). User-generated content, free labour and the cultural industries. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization, 10*(3/4), 267–284.

Hindman, M. (2008). *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Holmstrom, N. (1997). Exploitation. In K. Nielsen & R. Ware (Eds.), *Exploitation: Key concepts in critical theory* (pp. 81–102). New York, NY: Humanities Press International.

Jenkins, H. (2014). Rethinking 'Rethinking convergence/culture.' *Cultural Studies*, *28*(2), 267–297.

Kelty, C. M. (2008). *Two bits: The cultural significance of free software*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Kuehn, K., & Corrigan, T. F. (2013). Hope labor: The role of employment prospects in online social production. *Political Economy of Communication, 1*(1), 9–25.

Laney, D. (2012, May 3). To Facebook, you're worth $80.95. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from http://blogs.wsj.com/cio/2012/05/03/to-facebook- youre-worth-80-95

Lanier, J. (2013). *Who owns the future?* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Lessig, L. (2004). *Free culture: How big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity*. London, UK: Penguin.

Marwick, A., & Duffy, B. (2013, March 26). *Podcast and dialogue with Alice Marwick and Brooke Duffy.* Retrieved from http://culturedigitally.org/2013/03/podcast-and-dialogue- with-alice-marwick-and-brooke-duffy

Marx, K. (1973). *Grundrisse* (M. Nicolaus, Trans.). London, UK: Penguin.

Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (B. Fowkes, Trans.). Vol. 1. London, UK: Penguin.

Mayer, V. (2011). *Below the line: Producers and production studies in the new television economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Morozov, E. (2013). *To save everything, click here: The folly of technological solutionism*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs Books.

Ouellette, L., & Wilson, J. (2011). Women's work: Affective labour and convergence culture. *Cultural Studies, 25*(4–5), 548–565.

Postigo, H. (2009). America Online volunteers: Lessons from an early co-production community. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 12*(5), 451–469.

Radway, J. A. (1991). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Ross, A. (2000). The mental labor problem. *Social Text, 18*(2), 1–31.

Schoonmaker, S. (2012). Hacking the global: Constructing markets and commons through free software. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(4), 502–518.

Streeter, T. (2013). Dr. Thomas Streeter on Internet freedom, Interview by Adam Fish. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIDRjGhOEvU

Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text, 18*(2), 33–58.

Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Virno, P. (2004). *A grammar of the multitude* (I. Bertoletti, J. Cascaito, & A. Casson, Trans.). Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Walkerdine, V. (2009). *Children, gender, video games: Towards a relational approach to multimedia*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Weeks, K. (2011). *The problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wu, T. (2011). *The master switch: The rise and fall of information empires*. New York, NY: Random House Digital.